Programs and Services

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Week of March 20, 2006

AGE VERIFICATION WILL ENHANCE CANADA'S ACCESS TO WORLD BEEF MARKETS

Age verification is the way of the future for Canada's beef industry, as both the country and Saskatchewan rebuild their export markets, according Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Livestock Development Specialist Bob Klemmer.

"Saskatchewan, like elsewhere in Canada, is very dependant on export markets," he says. "When BSE came along, we lost all of those export markets, and we are just starting to gain them back. Prior to BSE, Canada exported over 60 per cent of its annual beef production."

Several of Canada's main export markets, including the USA and Japan, have requirements around verifying the age of animals or the age of beef from animals for import.

"Dentition, of course, is available to identify cattle/beef under 30 months of age destined for the U.S.," he explains. "Japan, however, requires that imported beef be verified as being under 21 months of age, which requires other methods of verification, such as the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency's (CCIA) voluntary and free-of-charge birth-date registration system and database."

While Japan and the USA accept the CCIA's birth-date registration system for age verification for export, Cam Daniels, the vice president of the Canadian Beef Export Federation (CBEF), says that, currently, there are not enough age-verified cattle to fill Japanese orders for beef under 21 months of age.

"We need more birth-date-based, age-verified beef to be available for export," Daniels says. "So I invite all beef producers to get their beef cattle and calf birth dates registered with the CCIA database. Indications are that age-verified calves are receiving a premium in some markets".

One of the reasons why producers should register the age of their calves is that more young beef will then become available for export.

Producers will benefit from this, especially if they retain ownership through to slaughter, comments SAF's Klemmer.

"The registration makes sense, especially to people who hang on to their calves because they will get direct benefit from it. But for producers in general, it also makes sense because you just don't know what will happen next year in terms of your calf crop. You may decide to hang on to some of them, or you may decide to take an ownership position in a feedlot. In that case, you need to have those numbers in the database."

Producers should know that feedlots with ties to beef packers trying to fill the Japanese export market will be looking for age-verified calves, and may have to bid more aggressively for these calves, he says.

"However two things have to happen to make this work: first, you need to get your calves' birth dates verified through the CCIA Age Verification Database, and second, you have to be prepared to market your calves as Age-Verified."

The CCIA database has been enhanced to include birth date and other management data at the request of the beef industry. The process of age verification is simply a matter of linking up the birth date information to the animal's tag number, according to Megan Gauley, Communications Co-ordinator with the CCIA.

"Beef producers can enter the birth dates of calves for up to 10 years back," she explains. "Individual birth dates, while nice to have, are not required as long as you have records to verify the dates of your calving period."

This means that, with the ability to cross-reference with cattle ID numbers, there is no reason why today's slaughter cattle couldn't be age-verified by birth date, but beef producers must first get the information entered onto the database.

Gauley invites all beef producers or their proxies to enter their birth date information on-line to the database.

"The starting place," she says, "is the CCIA website at http://www.canadaid.com/."

According to Bob Klemmer, some cattle markets have expressed interest in developing special sales for age-verified cattle, which would be of benefit to both cattle producer and buyer. However, there are still not enough cattle with verified birth dates to do so.

With the ability to verify the age of calves and finished cattle using the birth date information that cattlemen can enter themselves onto the CCIA database, beef export sales have an opportunity to grow once again. The data can be entered by the producer or by or by someone else who has access to the internet.

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SASKATCHEWAN FARMERS FINE STEWARDS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

They haven't always enjoyed the most trusting of relationships—archaeologists and farmers.

Innumerable archaeological sites have been lost forever through tillage since Saskatchewan was homesteaded. Even today, many farmers fear that disclosing archaeological remains on their property might lead to expropriation—something that has never occurred in the history of the province.

However, there are also some remarkable stories of farmers and ranchers who have gone out of their ways to ensure the preservation of evidence left by past users of the landscape. Some of them even achieved a certain degree of fame among the North American archaeological community.

David Meyer, a Professor of Archaeology at the University of Saskatchewan, has met a few of these people throughout his career.

"Many of them are deceased now," he says sadly. "I'm thinking of my old friend Archie Campbell in Bjorkdale. He was sort of a local mentor to me. He farmed—and the family continues to farm—there. They came to the Bjorkdale area around 1909 from Scotland. He developed a great interest in history and archaeology. He got involved in collecting artefacts from sites around Bjorkdale and Porcupine Plain. When I studied archaeology in the '60s and early '70s, I spent some time with him visiting the sites he knew in the area. That is how I became familiar with the archaeology of the area as well—as did others. He eventually donated his collection to the Department of Archaeology at the university."

Another amateur archaeologist who has made quite a contribution to our understanding archaeology in the southwest is Henri

Liboiron of Ponteix.

"His contribution was particularly important because he was so meticulous in everything he did," says Meyer. "He kept such good records of site locations and of what he collected. He had such good provenance information on his artefacts. Everything was identified as to what particular site in the Ponteix-Aneroid area they came from.

"Henri was even better than many professional archaeologists in that regard. He had educated himself to the point where he became very knowledgeable and had read many archaeological articles, on which he drew in his research endeavours."

These people earned their living from agricultural activities, yet their commitment to increasing our understanding of, and to preserving archaeological sites and resources in their home areas added a dimension to their farm and rangeland management practices that made them truly outstanding individuals.

Meyer has his own theory for what motivated them.

"These individuals shared interesting circumstances. Generally, they were born in the early 20th Century. They came into adulthood in the Depression era, in the early '20s and into the '30s. In a different world or situation—for instance, if they had grown up during the '60s—they might have gone through high school and university. I think of them as having been caught or trapped by the circumstances of their lives, in their home communities... but it was a real benefit to their communities to have people of such talent remaining in the communities.

"In the 1930s, there was so much wind erosion, especially in sandy fields, and artefacts were exposed by the wind. Eventually, this caught the attention of people like Henri and Archie. There was so much to see that was exposed. They made it a life-long passion to discover what these artefacts were all about, and we are indebted to these people for that."

During the early 1980s, David Meyer was at the Saskatchewan Research Council.

"One of our early projects had to do with the planned straightening and improvement of Highway 13 in southwestern Saskatchewanand through the Ponteix-Cadillac area. That meant we got in contact with Henri Liboiron. He was the man who knew what resources to preserve, what bend to leave as it was."

Before he died a few years ago, Henri made sure his collection and life's work would be made available to the public for study and viewing. It is now housed at the Noteku Heritage Museum in Ponteix, which he helped create.

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BORDER LINE FEEDERS BRINGS ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO CEYLON AREA

This is a project that has great hopes associated with it. The Border Line Feeders cattle feeding operation is now open for business.

The operation is located three miles south of Ceylon on Highway 6, and General Manager Ryan Thompson figures he has the best job he could ever hope for.

"I worked for Cargil Animal Nutrition as a feedlot consultant for three and a half years before I started here in September of 2005. I am from Carnduff, originally."

Thompson explains that the feedlot started taking cattle on October 14, 2005, and, within two months, they were up over 6,000 head. The feedlot is operating at capacity right now, and the plan is to increase production to 20,000 over time.

Here are some quick numbers to illustrate what it took to get the project off the ground: $84,000 in grant money; financing is in place to cover up to $1.7 million; Border Line Feeders has raised $1,501,000 in shareholder capital to date. There are 370 shareholders, mostly from within a 1,000-kilometre radius.

Now that the operation is running, fuel purchases to date amount to $17,907; there are seven full-time positions and two part-time positions; $95,748 has been spent to date on commodity purchases: barley, wheat, silage, supplement, hay and straw—the projected inputs budget is $1.5 to $2.5 million annually, spent mostly in local communities.

It has been a long, hard road for the project's promoters, says Thompson.

"Border Line Feeders incorporated in 2001. They started in March that year and didn't have the funding for construction in place until the spring of 2005. They spent four years doing business plans and raising the funds and capital in order to move ahead. When BSE hit, they basically lost a year and didn't push quite as hard, but we have moved on since."

Construction started on the feedlot in the spring of 2005. The first phase of construction was completed in October of 2005. An organization of this size creates many direct and indirect employment opportunities for local people and for former locals who want to return.

"For me," says Thompson, "the nicest thing was being able to come back to Saskatchewan and find opportunities for myself. There are not a lot of businesses like this that offer employment to people with my qualifications. It is great to be back. This is a great organization to be associated with—a good bunch of people, very tightly knit as well. There are always challenges within the beef industry, given the ups and downs of recent years. Managing the cycles and taking advantages of opportunities are what makes it exciting. Working with shareholders and neighbours to secure a local feed supply, I am sure we can grow this business locally."

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FUTURE OF THE HOG INDUSTRY CONFERENCE TO BE HELD IN SASKATOON

For the latest on swine development and production, Saskatoon will be the place to be on March 27 and 28, as the Prairie Swine Centre hosts its 2006 Focus On the Future Conference.

Ken Engele is with the Prairie Swine Centre.

"This conference was established back in 1999-2000," explains Ken Engele, the centre's Assistant Manager, Information Services. "We had completed a technology transfer review and, at that point in time, we had a previously established satellite conference. We dropped the satellite conference to concentrate on the Focus on the Future Conference. This will be the sixth annual conference, which rotates among the three Prairie Provinces. This year it is in Saskatoon, next year is Alberta, and the following year, it'll be in Manitoba."

The whole idea of the Focus on the Future Conference goes back to the technology transfer review, says Engele. It's a high-level technical conference that highlights the research carried out at the Prairie Swine Centre over the past calendar year. The conference is held over two days. Day 1 is actually a Pre-Conference Swine Health Seminar.

"It focuses on PWS and PCV2 viruses," says Engele. "These are diseases that some of the Quebec and Ontario hog producers are currently facing. They are at the root of the mortalities that they are seeing in their nursery barns. We have entitled Day 2 as Optimizing the Production Systems."

One of the issues that will be covered on Day 2 is how to maximize returns by incorporating field peas and pulses into the diet. The speaker will be Dr. Pascal Leterme, the PSC's new research scientist on nutrition. Dr. Leterme comes from Belgium by way of Columbia and France. He has a very extensive pulse development background from his time in Europe. Engele says he

is almost a global expert on the incorporation of peas and pulses into the diets of swine.

Also presenting at the conference will be Harold Gonyou, PSC's swine behaviourist, who will discuss a pig's perception of space, and how this knowledge can benefit a producer's operation. He will take a retrospective look at his past research as well as describe some of his ongoing projects. He will provide producers with a bottom line on how understanding a pig's perception of space will drive economic returns.

There will also be two breakout sessions. One looks specifically at large group housing and auto-sort systems. There seems to be a trend in the industry to focus more on group systems. In the past, finishing pigs had been housed in pens in groups of anywhere between 20 and 40 pigs per pen. Now, some producers are running anywhere from 100-pig groups to 1000-pig groups. Producers nearer the 1,000-pig end of the spectrum tend to incorporate auto-sorters into their systems. This is not a new technology, but it is constantly being refined.

Also on the agenda is Dr. John Patience, who will speak about addressing variability within the finishing barn. He will be exploring with participants how this affects the profitability of an operation.

"One important thing to note is that the conference is about tying a piece of research to actual practices," says Engele. "We try to make people think of how they can incorporate this type of research into their operations."

Based on past surveys, approximately 50 per cent of people in attendance will be pork producers, and the other 50 per cent will be feed company representatives, veterinarians or government/industry people.

"In the past, we have had between 100 to 120 people in attendance," says Engele. "We strive to attract the top pork producers in Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba. We are looking for the top 100 innovators among pork producers and leaders from the industry—from feed companies, genetics companies and associated pork industries—anybody who supplies product to the pork industry.

"Prairie Swine really tries to concentrate on near market growth finish research. Once we come up with the final research results, the producers can actually implement the research in their operation within anywhere from six months to two years of the final report."

The conference will be held at the Travelodge Hotel in Saskatoon. To find out more about the event, you may download the agenda at: http://www.prairieswine.ca/

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BISON HOBBY-RANCHING ENHANCES QUALITY OF LIFE

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of farm families relying on off-farm income to keep the farm alive. But increasingly, we are seeing newly rural families relying mostly on off-farm income to enjoy the farm lifestyle.

That is the case of Daniel Blais, a North Battleford teacher who dabbles in bison ranching about 15 kilometres southwest of Battleford, in the Eagle Hills Escarpment area.

"Our family got into bison in 1994, at the same time as my father. He now runs 50 head of buffalo, but at one point, he had a couple hundred head. Our big choice to move out was motivated by the desire to provide a healthy wholesome lifestyle for our children. I have a farm background myself. We lived in Battleford. We had a beautiful home and a large backyard, but it is still not the same—the liberty that life provides on a small farm.

"We have a half section of land and we have our bison and chickens. Someone else farms our broken land for us. It is not like

a farm where someone is running a couple hundred head of cattle or even 50—we have a herd of six bison. They are majestic critters. They do not require a lot of maintenance. They calve on their own. They are not prone to diseases. I de-worm them and take care of them like you would. I don't give them shots. I built a high-tensile steel, eight-strand, five-and-a-half-foot fence with one electric line in the middle of it, and I don't have to worry about keeping them contained.

"It was a big investment. At the time, the price of bison was way up. It made sense to invest in them. When the bison prices came down, at least my bison were paid for. The fence is there now, and will be for some time."

Blais and his wife were aware that full-time ranching was not an option for them.

"We knew that living out on our farm would never replace our in-town jobs. What we are hoping is that, perhaps with the bison and some of the rent revenue from the broken land, it would help to pay for some of the cost of travel to town. I can't say that it has necessarily done that, but we definitely have a good quality of life out here.

"Children love playing outside. When we first came out here, they were scared of going outside. There was no fence to keep them in, to give them a boundary, and they found that intimidating. A year later, they love it. They love the fact that there is no fence—that they can explore. All we had to do was to establish verbal perimeters."

Blais and his family were in awe of the location, and full of admiration for the authentic creature of the Canadian Plains that the bison is.

"When I moved out here, dad and I talked. I had some older cows and I basically bought from him some two-year-old heifers that I moved out here. They were young, and I felt I wouldn't have to worry about them trying to escape, as some of the older ones might. I moved out here with six bred two-year-olds. During our first year out here, I fenced off a quarter section and cross-fenced it. So I have four, 40-acre pastures that I use on rotation. I have a well on that quarter, so I run a summer line to a trough that is accessible to all four pastures. In one of the pastures, I also have a freshwater spring that the cattle can use up to late fall and again in the spring. They are free-range animals."

With his current set-up, and the amount of pasture he has, Blais figures he is pretty close to capacity in term of the number of animals he can keep.

"Eight to 10 breeding cows would be the maximum I'd want to have," he says. "I don't want to overtax the land. They're still a ruminant, and can put pressure on the land. I am an educator first; we want to keep bison ranching as a hobby. If prices rose and we wanted to buy more land, I suppose expanding could be an option."

Regardless of the size of his operation, Blais feels he is still part of the agricultural economy at some level, through the relationship he enjoys with the people who farm his land, with his community and feed suppliers, and with the channels through which he markets his crop of animals each year. At this point, he wouldn't give that up for the world.

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